The Phenomenon of Meaning: How Psychology Can Make Sense of It

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For it's not the things that feed his spirit, but rather the links between the things. Not the diamond, but some relations between people and the diamond may feed him. Not the sand, but some relations established between the sand and the tribes. Not the words in a book, but some relations existing in the book between and beyond words, relations that are love, poem and Lord's wisdom.

<div align="right">A. de Saint-Exupery</div>

MEANING AS PROBLEM

Misunderstanding is almost always warranted when one speaks of meaning. During the second half of the twentieth century, one could hardly find another psychological concept used as eagerly and widely, on the one hand, and as vaguely and loosely, on the other hand. One constantly feels something very important and promising in this word, but when using it, a protean or versatile nature is thus revealed, avoiding any strict definition (except for logical and linguistic definitions that are far too narrow from a psychological point of view). As a result, meaning provides a common (or neutral) territory for dialogue between academic science and the practical industry of psychotherapy and psychological help that function without exact definitions.

While working on my Ph.D. during the mid-1980s, I found over 25 distinct, originally theoretical views of personal meaning in psychological sources, not to speak of the linguistic and semantic conceptions of meaning as an impersonal reality (Leontiev, 1996). It certainly proves that there is a persistent need for a clearer understanding of meaning in psychology. The concept of meaning is at home in both everyday speech and in academic discourse; it is also at home in fundamental and applied research, in "depth" (Freudian) and "height" (Vygotskian) approaches, and in the traditional and humanistic paradigm. And

the postmodern situation in present-day psychology requires that we get in touch with the reality we study, rather than observe it distantly (Shotter, 1990). Today, it is more favorable than ever for the concept of meaning, which helps to transcend, as well as to link different contexts together. Meaning corresponds to objective, subjective, and intersubjective or "conversational" reality; and, it relates to consciousness, the unconscious, behavior, personality, as well as interpersonal processes. Whatever one studies, one cannot miss the importance of meanings.

Freud (1917/1953) discovered that whatever we do, it always means something. Adler (1932/1980) brought us to the realization that "human beings live in the realm of meanings" (p. 1). Frankl (1967) persuaded us that meaning is what our life actually is directed at, and guided by. The main problem is to discover what meaning is, and correspondingly, what one should seek in one's search for meaning. Until now, meaning remains an insightful metaphor rather than a scientific concept.

An obstacle is the English language, where the single word *meaning* denotes a striking multitude of phenomena while other languages use different words for different things. For instance, in German there is a clear conceptual opposition of *sinn* (sense) versus *bedeutung* (meaning), and this opposition plays a central role in all the humanities. The first pole of this opposition most often denotes subjective personalized meaning rooted in an individual's life, or a deep value-laden, cultural meaning. The second pole represents a culturally invariant elementary meaning (such as word meaning), which can be shared by a common community of language speakers. The same opposition exists in Russian with *smysl* (sense) versus *znachenie* (meaning). In English, however, the word *meaning* covers both poles (private, individual, personal, existential, idiosyncratic, and subjective, on the one hand, and public, collective, cultural, verbal, shared, and objective, on the other hand), and it is used for notions having almost nothing in common: for example, Freudian or Adlerian *sinn* (rooted in an unconscious dynamic), and Vygotskian *znachenie* (understood as a unit of condensed sociocultural, pragmatic experience). Two key dichotomies—*private*

versus public and *individual versus collective* (Harre, 1983)—which are fairly well conceptualized both in German and in Russian, dissolve in the English word *meaning*. It is no wonder that the pioneers who first introduced the concept of meaning (beyond a purely linguistic context) in the humanities, were German-speaking (E. Husserl, W. Dilthey, E. Spranger, M. Weber, S. Freud, C. Jung, A. Adler), and Russian-speaking (G. Shpet, M. Bakhtin, L. Vygotsky) authors.

It is not only the problem of translating foreign texts into English that makes these difficulties evident. Some authors, using the concept of meaning, have to describe meaning on different levels in different ways (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972; Carlsen, 1988). In fact, at these different levels we discover somewhat different realities, but language still fails to catch some of the important distinctions. One possible way would be to use the English word *sense* in a conceptual opposition *sense* versus *meaning*, especially considering its etymological closeness to the German *sinn*. "The word 'sense' (*sinn*) stems from the Old High German verb *sinnan*. In the old days *sinnan* meant: to be on the way towards a goal" (Boss, 1988, p. 115). Unfortunately, the word *sense* is rarely used in this context (rare examples: Bugental, 1976; Gendlin, 1981), and it usually evokes associations with sensory processes rather than with the dynamics of the individual personality.

A systematic analysis of different definitions and other ways of using the concept of meaning in psychology, and in the humanities (beyond a purely linguistic context), reveals only two basic properties that may serve as a commonly accepted point of departure: (a) a meaning of an object, event or action exists only within a definite context; in different contexts the same object has different meanings, and (b) meaning always points to some intention, goal, reason, necessity, including desired or supposed consequences, or instrumental utility. In short, defining the meaning of anything presupposes placing it into some intentional context. This is not, however, a purely cognitive operation, resulting only in a new level of understanding. Making sense of our actions, as well as making sense of outside events, gives our activity a totally new quality.

MEANING AS A REGULATING PRINCIPLE

The existing approaches to meaning can be classified through the understanding of the ontological nature of meaning; for example, it may be interpreted as objective reality, subjective reality, or conversational reality. Another dimension of classification is the view of the functional levels of meaning. Meaning can be understood as *the meaning*, the single ultimately integrative reference point inside the person, or as *a meaning* representing an element of ever present mechanisms connected with the ongoing regulation of behavior and cognition (see Leontiev, 1996, for details). The second dimension seems to me to be even more important than the first. Paradoxically, the more weight is ascribed to this concept, the less important it becomes in the explanation of human life. I suppose we may take for granted that human life is a self-regulated or self-controlled process. Any explanation in terms of regulation presupposes an idea of: (a) the criteria of regulation, that is, the desired state or ideal to which the system is supposed to strive, and (b) the psychological mechanisms that are supposed to make the system move toward this criteria. The second point is far more important, because we may change the criteria, with the mechanisms being maintained, and the system would then keep functioning in the same way, just in another direction; however, if we change the regulating mechanisms, we then change the principles of the entire process of functioning. The least important aspect in the Adlerian revolution against Freud was his change of libido for the striving for power and superiority as the ultimate criteria of regulation; the most important aspect was the shift from past causes to anticipated goals as the motives of actions. It may also be that the transformation of the regulating mechanisms will also change the criteria. For example, in Maddi's (1971) theory the predominance of psychological needs over biological and social ones results in different mechanisms of behavioral regulation that change the whole direction of personality development.

Meaning, as a psychological concept, is a very important explanatory principle for human behavior and life inasmuch as it differs from animal behavior and life. However, today it would be too simplified to understand human behavior simply as meaning-seeking

behavior based on responses to stimuli, operant conditioning, social learning, and defense mechanisms. Meaning is much more than the ultimate level or integral criterion: it is a principle of the regulation of behavior functioning at all levels.

Psychology recognizes other regulating principles, and in reality there is no one regulating principle of human behavior. In what I call the *Multiregulation Personality Model* (Leontiev, 1999), six competing regulative principles are described for human behavior, and the list may not be complete. Phenomenologically, this model describes the varieties of logic of behavior, specified by the answer to the question: "Why do you (and people in general) behave the way you (they) do?" Although these principles are described as pure cases, in actual behavior they seem to merge into more or less complicated systems, where actual behavior is usually multi-controlled, except in some cases of pathology.

1. *The logic of drive gratification* underscores the response: "Because I want (need, strive to do) something."
2. *The logic of responding to stimuli* underscores the response: "Because something or someone provoked or teased me."
3. *The logic of learned habits and dispositions* underscores the response: "Because I always (use to) behave this way."
4. *The logic of social norms and expectations*. The relevant answer: "Because this is the way one should behave and most people behave this way in this situation."
5. *The logic of a life-world, or the logic of meaning*. The relevant answer: "Because this is important for me, this matters."
6. *The logic of free choice*. The relevant answer: "Why not?"

Logic 1, 2, and 3 are common for humans and animals. The manifestations of logic 4, the logic of social norms and expectations, though distinctively human, characterize an impersonal, hyper-socialized individual, a "social animal," which corresponds to the conformist path of personality development, as understood by Maddi (1971).

Logic 5 is only inherent in humans, due to the fundamental difference between humans and animals, which is explained by several thinkers in very similar terms: For animals there is nothing but the environment; however, for humans, there is the world (Vygotsky, 1934/82, p. 280; Frankl, 1982, p. 116). All animal behavior (i.e., logic 1, 2, and 3) is tied to the immediate environment and to internal impulses, in other words to the situation of the "here and now"; and, all of the sources of its determination lie within the (external + internal) situation. We find no factors influencing animals besides the actual external stimuli and the actual internal urges (drives and programs). Unlike animals, humans are able to relate their activity to their entire *life-world* rather than to an actual situation; their activity is determined by the world at large, as opposed to the environment. This means that by following this logic in human action, reasons and incentives that are located far beyond the situation, including distant consequences and complicated connections, are then taken into account together with immediate incentives. It is not a purely rational logic, or a purely cognitive capacity, though cognitive schemes play an important role in the regulation processes based on this logic. Personality, as a psychological category, appears as an organ or a system of mechanisms, providing regulation of human activity throughout the entire structure of an individual's relations to the world, behaving according to the logic of meaning. A life-world, however, not only includes the world in which one lives and to which one relates, but it also includes one's inner world. The inner world is not a picture or reflection or image of the outer world; the main function of the inner world is to *make sense* of the objects and events of the outer world in the context of an individual's life.

The six principles of logic may be treated as six dimensions of human behavior. Every action can be split into six vectors, with each of the vectors representing a projection of the whole action related to the dimension of this or that logic. Keeping the proposed model in mind, we will first notice *considerable individual differences* in the use of all six principles. The most important understanding at this point is that different people transcend immediate personal urges and needs into the realm of meanings to different degrees. Second, it is evident that there are *develop-*

mental trends and successions with respect to all of the logical principles mentioned. Third, clinical psychology provides enough evidence for separate types of *distortions* of these regulatory systems; in particular, psychopathy presents the distortion of meaning-based regulation that result in behavior according to momentary urges. The ability of self-control, characteristic of a psychologically sound person, presupposes the balanced development of all six (or, at least, the first five) regulatory systems; the dominant role should belong to the highest, distinctively human ones.

The relationship between these higher laws of the regulation of behavior, and the lower ones, has been brilliantly expressed by Hegel (1927): "Circumstances or urges dominate a person only to the extent to which he allows them to do so" (p. 45). A person is thus able to both allow the lower principles of logic to guide the definite action, and not to allow certain things to happen. In a similar context, Rollo May (1967) described a distinctively human capacity as being able to deliberately take either the position of an active subject, or that of a passive object.

It follows from the considerations listed above that human beings act in accordance with different regulating principles, or logic, some of which are inherited from the animal world, and some of which relate to being distinctly human. Relations between animal and human potentialities of behavior within an individual are ones of competition, rather than of fighting or even submission. Both possibilities are open for us in many diverging points of bifurcation: the ability of acting as any other animal would do, or to act as only humans are able to. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell on the human drama of choosing between these options. However, what is the most important point in this context is the *meaning-based regulation* that gives one the possibility of transcending behavior determination both by internal impulses and learned programs, and by actual external stimulation. In other words, meaning offers a person a high degree of freedom from what is determined. A personal life-world ultimately maintains the capacity of creating a new intentional context for human activity. This is best exemplified by the following story: A number of active members of nobility were

in the opposition movement in Russia, the so-called Decembrists, who had openly revolted against Czar Nikolaus I in December, 1825. Ultimately they lost, and were arrested and finally banished to a penal colony in Siberia. A colony officer strongly disliked them, and, wishing to destroy the young men morally, made them carry heavy stones from one place to another, then back, again and again. They were about to lose their minds and their spirit with this meaningless labor, but then the solution appeared. They found the meaning to their predicament: They started carrying the stones quickly, with accurate precision, in order to infuriate the officer and to make *him* lose his spirit. In the end they were most successful.

An animal responds to a stimulus representing the actual environment. Human action is guided by a meaning representing one's personal life-world. A meaningful action is a mediated action—mediated by a life-world. You act meaningfully, or are regulated in a meaningful or human way, if your action (however local it may be) takes into account the whole life-world of yourself, spreading far beyond the actual situation. Behaving according to the logic of a personal life-world, or according to the principle of meaning, is taking into account the entire multitude of personal contexts that matter, rather than only the "here and now" urges and demands. However, to have your behavior controlled by meaning, by your own personal life-world, you should have your life-world developed enough to provide meanings that differ from those stemming from the immediate situation.

THE ONTOLOGY OF MEANING

We find meaning first of all through our mind—we perceive, imagine, or recollect things not as exact projections, but as having some personal meaning for us, a meaning that manifests itself through image transformations (see Leontiev, 1990). But it would be too hasty to call meaning a subjective reality, although this *phenomenological dimension of meaning*—its direct representation in consciousness—is quite important.

We find meaning, then, in various effects on behavior and on performance at large. If we ask young boys to hold their breath for as long as possible, then ask them to beat their previous record, and then ask them

to imagine a partner to compete with, the results will normally increase (Aidman, 1988). What we accomplish with this method is to help find additional meaning through enlarging the context of one's own actions, resulting in improved performance. I call these effects the *behavioral dimension of meaning*.

The most important aspect, however, is that both phenomenological and behavioral manifestations of meaning are derivatives of the third aspect that I call the *ontological dimension of meaning*. What we see in traditional psychological research are emotional responses and evaluations, psychodynamics, changes in perceptual images or other cognitive representations, changes in performance, direction, and results of activity. We see no meaning. Any attempts to distinguish between personal meaning and emotion, personal meaning and connotation, personal meaning and attitude, *inter alia*, remain futile until we leave behind the psychological processes and events by transcending them into the realm of personal-world relationships. In order to discover the meaning of an action, an object, or an event for any person (including ourselves), we must investigate the person's life-world, disclosing the links between the given action, object or event, and everything that is important for him/her in the world. The concept of the world does not belong within the scope of psychology, and a person's underlying ontological links to the world cannot be empirically assessed or measured. Nevertheless, many questions belonging to different branches of general psychology cannot be answered in the fashion of an empirical science only, without postulating some basic ontological structure and considering this structure within a theoretical explanation. The ontological links are theoretical constructions that are not noticeable or detectable; however, they serve as a necessary element of psychological explanation, as an independent variable that does not contain a psychological nature. The sum total of these links defines the *life-meaning* of the given action, object, or event, that is its place and role in the person's life. To define the meaning of some object, event, or action for anyone is to put it into the context of the person's life as a whole.

The meaningful links that embody the living fibers of a life-world can also explain why something unim-

portant may become important. These links can be expressed in colloquial words: for the sake of, in order to prevent, to escape, to provide, to facilitate; it is a sign of, it warns, it helps, it brings something closer, it is important, etc. The links and interrelations define the whole structure. This point is illustrated precisely by the example offered by J. Nuttin (1984, p. 71): A student may try hard to study well in order to win his parents' approval, or, he may try hard to win his parents' approval in order to obtain the possibility to study in the first place. What we encounter here are not just two different motives, but two different *means-end* structures or links of *meaning*.

Conditioning is simply a very special case of establishing links of meaning. More often these links have another nature than conditioning; it is a matter of the dynamics of life, the flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), rather than training. Generally, the structure of meaning includes three elements: a *carrier of meaning* (the meaning of what we are discussing); the *source of meaning* (an element or a structure of the context that gives meaning to the carrier); and the *meaning-link* (i.e., the psycho-logical aspect of the connection between the carrier and the source). Meaning flows along the trajectories of meaningful links from sources to carriers that become sources for new carriers, etc. Some aspects of this dynamic structure have been conceptualized by different theorists in different ways: for example, as psychodynamics (Freud, 1917/1953), valence (Lewin, 1935), expectancy x value model (Tolman, 1951), goal instrumentality (Vroom, 1964), personal construct systems (Kelly, 1955), psycho-logics (Smedslund, 1984), valuation (Hermans, 1998), etc.; however, each of these approaches only includes certain types of links of meaning.

The links of meaning represent the core of the phenomenon of meaning because they can be found in the ontological dimension alone. All of the knots along the trajectories of meaning, within the living tissues of the network of the life-world that complete the web of meaning, belong to this dimension. This dimension is the key to the triadic, three-dimensional structure of meaning: only within the ontological dimension can one find the links between the elements of the personal life-world, the links that can explain

certain psychological effects. I call this the principle of ontological mediation: behavioral and phenomenological effects of meaning reflect ontological dynamics (what is going on between you and the world). A person can study meaning with any kind of research tools inasmuch as one can take into account the ontological dynamics as the primary reality explaining all of the psychological effects (though psychological instruments don't capture this reality directly). Otherwise, one will study emotions, connotations, or whatever, but not meaning. This is why the problem of personal meaning escapes any positivistic approach (in the traditional sense of this word).

MEANING-BASED REGULATION AS THE MEASURE OF HUMANITY

A psychologist sees meaning phenomena as manifested in the phenomenological dimension (i.e., selecting, transforming, or emotionally coloring of the images), or in the behavioral dimension (i.e., energizing, blocking, or directing the activity). The relationship between these manifestations and the ontological links of meaning represents a "converted form" (Mamardashvili, 1970). This concept presumes that some content being transposed onto another substratum is being transformed according to the functional properties of the new substratum, like the narrative of a novel being transformed into a movie script: both are quite different texts, but, in a sense, they are one.

There is a long tradition of theoretical and experimental studies of phenomenological and behavioral manifestations of meaning-based activity regulation (usually called sense regulation) in Soviet/Russian psychology (Leontiev, 1991, 1998). The most integral concept dealing with sense regulation is the concept of the *sphere of sense* related to the personality (Bratus, 1990), that I would define as the system of *refracted personal meanings* incorporated into the mechanisms of human cognition and practical activity that control this activity, according to the logic of the personal life-world.

The most comprehensive account of this tradition is given in my recent works (Leontiev, 1999), where I propose a highly complex, theoretical model of

structure and functioning of meaning-based regulation in human cognition and practical activity. What I consider to be most important is that individuals evidently differ in their capacities of meaning regulation. Six individual variables relevant to this sphere have been proposed:

- The most important is general teleological versus causal orientation, doing things *for the sake of* something rather than *because of* something.
- The quantitative measure of meaning as a factual presence in life, e.g., as measured by Purpose-in-Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964).
- Value/need ratio in meaning sources. This point deserves a much more detailed description, for which I have no place here (see Leontiev, 1998).
- Structural coherence of personal meanings within personality structure (e.g., Leontiev, in press).
- The capacity of reflexive awareness of one's relations to the world.
- Sound integration of past, present, and future orientations.

Numerous studies of sense regulation in different forms of mental pathology have revealed that: (a) although in most cases the sphere of sense is usually damaged, the changes are nonspecific with respect to the classification of diseases, (b) most of the pathological or maladaptive changes concern structural mechanisms of regulation rather than meanings themselves, and (c) with mental pathology, the more mature the person is when the disease begins, the less are the changes within sense regulation, as a rule, and the prognosis of recovery will be better.

However, studies of delinquents as subjects, without a manifested mental pathology, have provided a much clearer picture of specific distortions of meaning-based regulation, as well as the sense sphere of personality. In particular, juvenile delinquents, as compared to non-delinquents, (a) tend to be reactive rather than proactive, (b) have lower scores on the Purpose-in-Life test, (c) have a weak and distorted role of values, (d) have poorly constructed personal meanings, (e) show poor reflexive awareness, and (f) are centered in the present, having a distorted orientation of the future (Leontiev, 1999). In other words, this sample exemplifies the underdevelopment of the

capacity of meaning regulation that can be labeled as a special metapathology (Maslow, 1976) of meaning-based regulation of behavior. Considering that meaning-based regulation represents a specifically human way of relating to the world, what we meet in delinquents is some deficit of humanity, or "human diminution" (Maslow, 1976), rather than a pathology in the exact meaning of the word. Interestingly enough, in our studies with juvenile delinquents, we have also discovered a "delinquent" personality pattern in a number of participants from the control sample as well. Being psychologically disposed as delinquents, the subjects seem to have been lucky enough not to get into conflict with the law.

CONCLUSION

During the entire last century, mainstream psychology tried to study human behavior in its subhuman manifestations only. By adding the dimensions of meaning, and meaning regulation, the mechanisms of activity obtained a completely new quality—a specifically human one. This does not imply, however, that we must totally break with mainstream psychology. Maslow (1976) stated that a completely new theory of motivation must be written for self-actualizing persons. I would state that we must somewhat re-write the old theory rather than throw it away. The challenge is whether we can describe and investigate human activity as qualitatively different from animal behavior, while incorporating all of the subhuman mechanisms as well, and to demonstrate how and why a human being may choose to behave either in a human or in a subhuman way. This is the challenge for the next millennium, carried over from the twentieth century, the century that experienced both the godlike heights of the human spirit, and the complete betrayal of humanity.

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